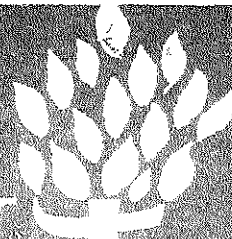


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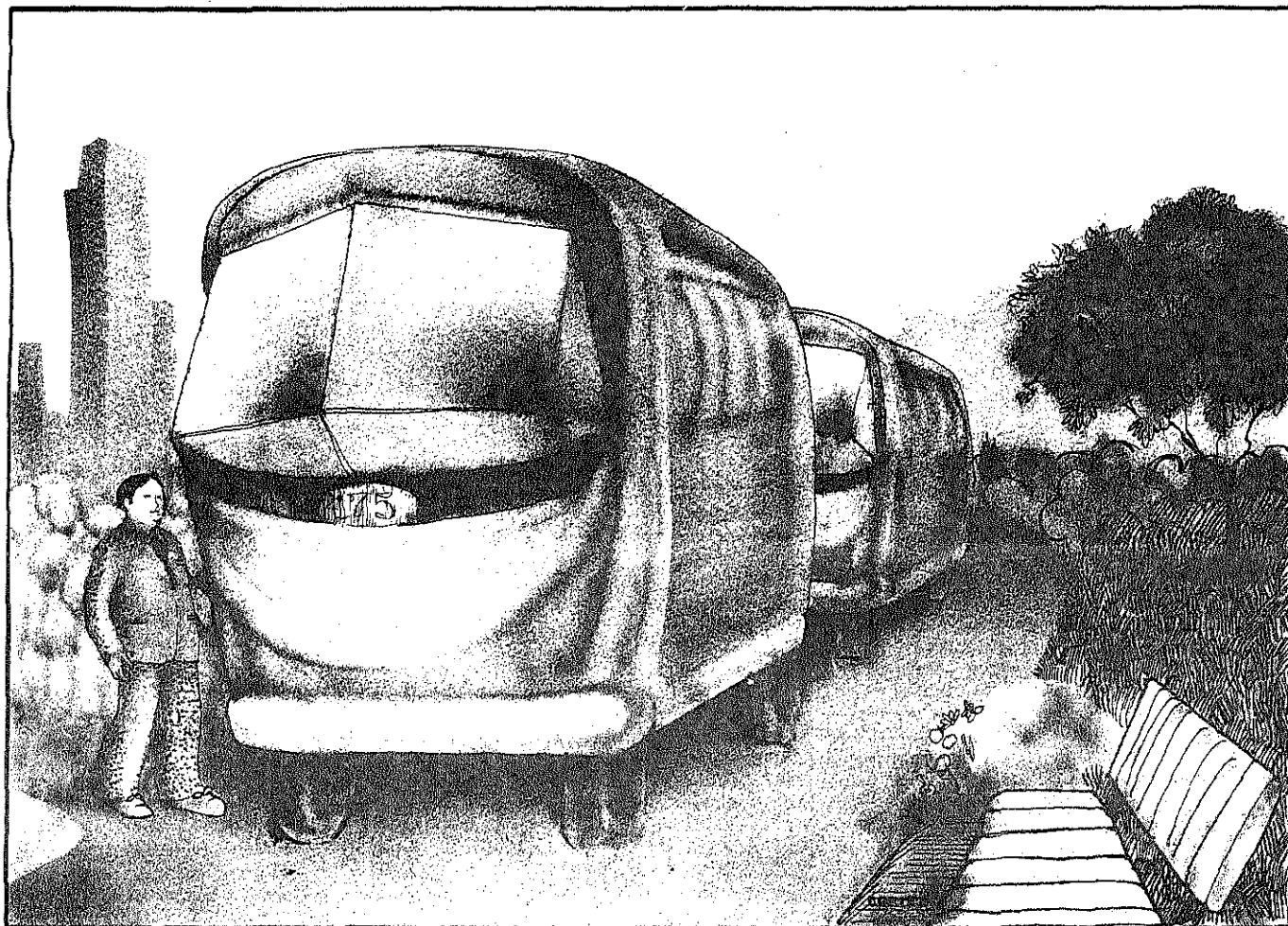
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**FREE THE BUSES!**

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FREE THE BUSES: A PLAN FOR PEOPLE



By John David Hulchanski

What if Mayor Corning, in his next news conference, announced that bus service in the Capital District would be free from now on, that it was being placed on the same basis as police and fire protection -- as one of the services provided by the city without specific charge at the time the service is used? This would undoubtedly both shock and please most people in the area. But why and how could bus service be free?

The Mayor would defend his move by pointing out that, because of the ever increasing volume of automobiles in the city, the only alternative would be more arterials, such as the proposed six lane highway through Washington Park. He would cite the enormous cost, both human and financial, of such highways, and would note that the buses presently operating are being heavily subsidized while, for the most part, running empty. By reorganizing the entire bus system, and attempting to make it rapid, frequent and free, more people would use it! This would then pave the way for decreasing use of the car within the city, causing smaller amounts of pollution less need for more urban superhighways, a probable revival of the downtown shopping district, main shopping streets could become pedestrian malls, the city's parks could be closed to traffic, and apartments, playgrounds and parks could rise from present-day parking lots.

Sound impossible? Not really. Atlanta, Georgia, for example, has recently reduced bus fares to 15 cents, reorganized the routes and schedules and purchased 430 new air-conditioned, pollution-controlled buses. Previously, Atlanta had a worn-out private busline which charged 40 cents per ride. Terrell Hill, a designer of Atlanta's new transit system, said that if the plan had not been initiated, "Atlanta would have become another of the faded old cities of the Eastern seaboard," due largely to the increasing volume of private automobiles. In gas, parking, depreciation, and insurance fees. Current bus users will save at least \$80 a year in comparison with the old fare. The new system will cost \$1.4 billion, of which the federal government will contribute two-thirds.

So instead of building roadways, Atlanta will get one of the nation's newest mass transit systems, incorporating both bus and high speed rail, and a fare reduction as an inducement for residents to shift from auto to bus. It is estimated that if a worker in Atlanta uses mass transit instead of his car, he will save \$635 a year.

Atlanta isn't the only city reducing its fares. Michael J. Caffrey, chairman of the Chicago Transit Authority, recently

announced that he favors no-fare transportation in the city's central business district. Caffrey said the no-fare system would be inaugurated on a subway now being built and would then be extended "to rapid transit downtown and then to shuttle buses." Honolulu was recently forced to take over its failing private transit lines and immediately instituted no-fare riding for the elderly. The city is also considering extending the same exemption to all school children. In Commerce, California, which is located near Los Angeles, a fareless bus system has been in operation for the past eight years.

These are only a few examples of what some cities are doing to promote the use of their transit facilities. Robert Abrams, Borough President of the Bronx, has been advocating a no-fare system for New York City. In a recent article in the New York Times, after noting that some cities are reducing or abolishing fares, he stated: "Those cities recognize that if they are to prosper, or indeed survive, they must provide maximum mobility for their workers and shoppers and stop the air-fouling, land gobbling onslaught of the private automobile. The only way to accomplish this is to shift the burden of transit financing away from the individual

rider at the fare box." Abrams believes mass transportation is a fundamental public necessity which should be paid for from general tax revenues, such as police, sanitation and other public services.

But does all this really apply to Albany, a relatively small city, and a city with a new arterial system under construction? Is the level of congestion, even during rush hours, enough to warrant a far reaching mass transit program? The answer is a definite yes!

Within the next few years the South Mall, the new arterials, the planned Ten Eyck project, the North Pearl Street project and several other large office buildings will all be completed, bringing thousands of additional people into the downtown area each day. But where will all these people park? Chances are they will all be driving automobiles, and on the average, these autos will be carrying only one person each. The South Mall and Ten Eyck projects will provide some parking facilities, but no where near the number needed. The South Mall alone is supposed to house 11,000 stateworkers when it is finished.

The solution in the past has been to build more parking facilities. But this becomes counter-productive in two major ways. First, clearing valuable land for parking destroys a community's characteristics and the cohesiveness of business areas. And second, more and more cars will be drawn into the city because of the increased availability of parking. This in turn means more parking will have to be built, then more estate turned into parking, and so on, in an endless circle. The same applies to construction of superhighways and widening of roads. Experience has shown that Parkinson's Law, which states that expenditures rise to meet income, holds true for highways; that is, traffic will increase to the limit of road accommodations. No matter how wide a road you build, or how many roads you build, you will still end up with congestion. Since traffic increases with the supply of facilities, the traffic problem will never be solved. New highways simply attract and make room for more cars. Albany's new arterials will

simply make it easier and quicker to dump more vehicles into the already congested downtown area. Thus, in the near future, Albany's arterials will breed excessive parking lots, air pollution, congestions, and all the other traffic ills which have created the crises all our cities witness today.

What is the answer then? As already indicated, free public transportation in the Capital District is a viable and practical solution. Reorganizing and rerouting the present bus system is not enough! An incentive to ride the bus must be provided. Since the buses are running anyway, since they are already publicly owned (The Capital District Transit Authority) and subsidized from general tax revenues, and since the CDTA is attempting to improve service, there is no reason to let them roam the streets half empty or totally empty.

If free, efficient public transportation were provided, the areas arterials could be utilized by essential traffic only, trucks, buses, taxis, and those autos, essential for business. With free, subsidized transit, everyone who benefits from the service pays for it. This is because everyone would benefit from transit. Those who would still drive their cars would benefit when their neighbors leave their cars home or at a peripheral parking lot and take a bus to work, making fewer demands upon existing highways. On the other hand, many people don't drive downtown and don't need improved transit. So why should they pay. For the same reason everyone pays for a park or playground. Not everyone uses them, but everyone pays for them.

The actual costs and methods of funding such a free public bus system is not overwhelming, even in this period of fiscal crisis. The federal government has existing and expanding programs for funding such as free public bus system, even in this period of fiscal crisis. Furthermore, the local and State governments are already providing vast subsidies for the local bus system through the C.D.T.A. There are many funding programs that could be worked out since it would be a regional bus system with all the localities, both cities and suburbs, paying their share. As other cities have found, the economic benefits to an area, especially to downtown sections, would be vast. Physical development and business activity become easier increasing, among other things, the amount of taxes collected.

However, initiating a free, efficient public network will not be a cure for all the areas ills, nor will it be a very easy or quick thing to bring about. But it is something which sooner or later will have to be done. Even suburban areas, such as Colonie and Latham, are becoming overly congested. It is time we recognize that our present highway program is the result of political decisions made back in the 1950's which committed us to an auto dominated transportation system for the specific purpose of selling automobiles, rubber tires, gasoline, oil, concrete, steel, etc. But it is not working. The pollution is killing us, our resources are being wasted and depleted and our cities are being buried under ribbons of concrete and acres of parking lots, with no end in sight.



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